

Fire's death toll at 25; search for bodies ends

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By Sarah Thailing
and Harry Harris
Tribune staff writers

The death toll from last Sunday's conflagration in the Oakland and Berkeley hills may stop at 25, Oakland police said yesterday as they called off their official search for the dead.

Homicide investigators said they would respond immediately if residents or cleanup crews find any remains.

Police also suspect that the two people still listed as missing are actually among the unidentified dead, and they are scaling back around-the-clock efforts to find them.

One of the missing, Anthony Beliso, 29, of San Francisco, told friends and family that he was spending the weekend of the fire with friends in the Claremont. He hasn't been home or shown up for work since the fire.

The tragedy took on a sense of resolution as the American Red Cross announced what it believes to be the final tally of destruction wrought by the blaze. The fire damaged 3,354 residences, including 2,890 homes

and 464 apartments that were completely destroyed.

The fire caused an estimated minimum of \$1.5 billion in damages, making it the most destructive wildfire in state history and one of the most destructive fires in U.S. history.

The personnel response to the blaze cost \$10 million, the cleanup of storm drains is projected at \$600,000, and street reconstruction could cost \$650,000, according to Oakland Fire Capt. Raymond Henson.

Meanwhile, city officials breathed a sigh of relief after the soil on the barren hills survived a night of heavy rain without slipping. The rain hampered fire relief efforts and clogged storm drains, but stopped short of setting off a cascade of mud.

The storm dropped more than 2 inches of rain on the hills, according to National Weather Service forecaster John Plankinton.

But the danger of more rain today seemed remote last night, he said, predicting light showers

1 Anniversary T-shirt
 4th Prize: 1 Anniversary pin,
 1 Anniversary poster, 1 T-shirt
 3rd Prize: 1 anniversary pin,
 1 anniversary poster, 1 T-shirt

part in honor of the
 1967?

25 dead, 3,35

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and clouds this morning giving way to a cool, sunny afternoon and winds gusting up to 35 miles an hour.

Another wet weather front currently whirling out of the Gulf of Alaska looks as if it may avoid the Bay Area as it passes through California tomorrow or Tuesday, Plankinton said.

"Thank God the rain has subsided," said Jordan Rich, who heads the Berkeley Public Works Department.

More than 200 people pitched in to clean up a steep canyon in Berkeley that burned in the fire.

Crews formed by the city's public works department, the U.S. Coast Guard and the East Bay Conservation Corps cleared debris from Vicente and Alvarado roads. Workers lined the streets with sandbags to keep the soil in place and started seeding the barren land with native grasses to fight erosion.

Some of Berkeley's homeless people filled burlap bags with sand to help in the relief effort, hoping that Federal Emergency Management Agency funds might yield them a wage.

East Bay Conservation Corps members wearing bright yellow slickers and hard hats dotted the black hills. The workers cleared away burned branches near the 7,000 feet of mesh fabric fences they had set up the day before to trap sliding silt.

"I saw all the devastation and the traumatic states that people were in," said corps member Shawn Woods, 18, of Oakland, who got up before 5 a.m. to work for \$5.50 an hour. "My house didn't get burned, so I wanted to do what I could to help out."

Joanna Lennon, executive director of the corps, said the silt fences need to be erected in precarious areas as quickly as possible.

"We're racing against time to get as many fences in there as we can," Lennon said at a Claremont hotel press conference announcing a \$10,000 grant from AT&T for the corps.

The fire that flared to 2,000 degrees seared the soil in the hills so severely a week ago that only a few inches will absorb



By Wendy L

Kim Gagnon and Don Bunce line sand bags along Vincente Road to fend off possible m

water, Lennon said.

She compared the "hydrophobic" soil to hard-packed snow on a ski slope. Heavy rains can turn the barren hills into a giant mudslide just as fresh snowfall can set off a thundering avalanche.

In Oakland, 75 workers from the city Public Works Department and 50 from the California Conservation Corps worked in the blackened hills near the Parkwoods Apartments just off Highway 24, said spokeswoman Surlene Grant.

She said workers cleared debris and set up silt fences and hay bales to hold back soil that could be washed loose by rain. As many as 500 workers from the state's conservation corps and its local branches may be mobilized to clean up Oakland in the coming week, she said.

The rain delayed the city's plan yesterday to plant fast-



By Wendy L

Joanna Lennon, executive director of East Bay Conservation Corps, with workers on Vincente Road.

Residences gone

growing grass and wildflower seeds over the 1,400 acres of fire-scarred landscape.

If the weather is clear this morning, a helicopter will disperse more than 40,000 pounds of the seeds to plant clover, California golden poppies and three different kinds of grasses, according to Dennis Moore of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Soil Conservation Service.

In other fire updates:

■ PG&E said crews have removed more than 400,000 pounds of burned poles and downed lines and transformers, and replaced 1,500 poles and miles of power lines.

■ Close to 800 fire victims permitted to return home still have no telephone service, but more than 100 Pacific Bell workers were scheduled to work until this morning to handle repairs and cleanup.

The phone company plans to

add more workers today.

Pac Bell spokesman Dick Fitzmaurice said 700 people in Oakland are still without phone service.

About 2,000 affected customers have been given temporary phone service.

"In some cases, workers have had to string wires over lawns, through trees and in street gutters just to get a dial tone," he said.

■ The Alameda County Sheriff's Department identified four more victims, all from Oakland, who were found dead from the fire. They were John Alexander Grant, 77, of Marlin Cove Road; Lucy Chi-Wen Mantz, 46, of Schooner Hill Road; Patrick Emmett O'Neill, 40, of Norfolk Road; and Francis Gray Scott, 85, of Alvarado Road.

Tribune staff writers Carolyn Marshall and Nancy Zubiri contributed to this report.

No More Home Sweet Home

A NEWSWEEK writer tells how the Oakland fire devastated lives and destroyed his own house

Devastation is always distressing to witness, but particularly when it's your own. I can now speak from experience: last week, a firestorm—perhaps the worst in recent U.S. history—roared through the Oakland/Berkeley hills where I've lived since 1982, turning eucalyptus groves and well-manicured homes into ashen dunes. The human toll was hideous: 24 dead, 17 missing and 150 injured. There was also \$1.5 billion in damage, including more than 3,354 destroyed houses and apartments. One of those homes was, unluckily, mine—rebuilt shingle by shingle, brick by brick by its owner over the last two years.

For several days, the police kept everyone but journalists and rescue workers out of the neighborhood. No one could have expected to return home to a moonscape. But that's what I found when, after a hasty return from an out-of-town trip, I climbed the hill with two Red Cross workers who specialize in tornadoes, hurricanes and earthquakes.

I knew there was trouble when one of these case-hardened fellows whistled and said, "I've never seen anything like this." The entire hillside looked like a Hieronymus Bosch view of hell. With the exception of two chimneys, the neighborhood was completely flat: no decks, no stairways, no second stories. It was still smoldering; the stench of smoke was everywhere. Down the street from me, police used German shepherds and bone sifters to search for physical remains. (One rock held a sign: WE LOVE YOU JACK, WHERE ARE YOU?) Other policemen stood guard against looters. The Red Cross workers groped for comparisons: one said Beirut, the other, Saigon. We briefly poked around in the rubble that once was home, trying to find a fire safe. No luck. "Things vaporize," one of the emergency workers told me.

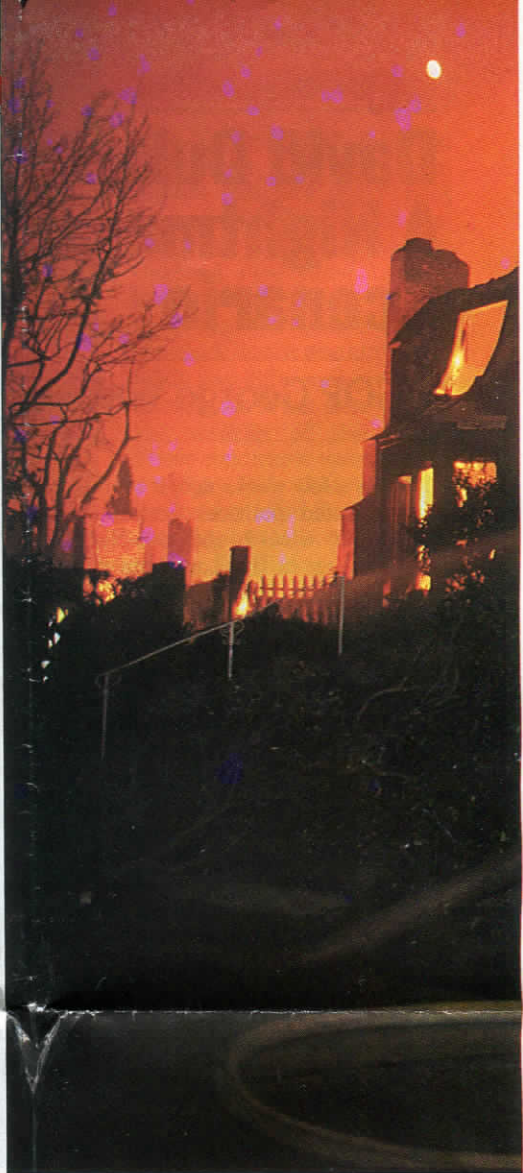
The flames that swept through my

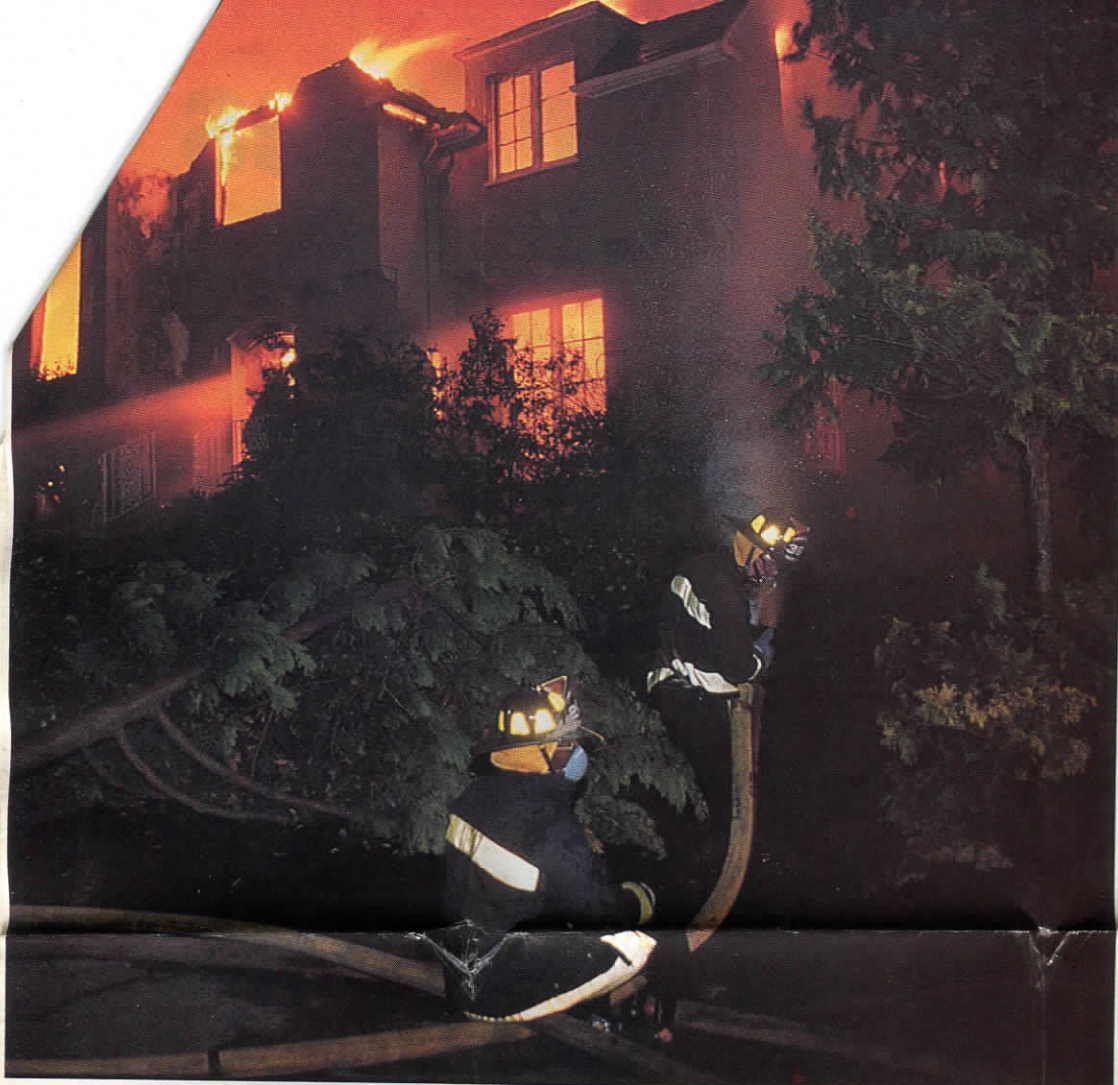
neighborhood on a quiet Sunday morning reportedly started the day before as a small grass fire near the site of an illegally constructed cabin. The Oakland Fire Department put out the brush fire and periodically rechecked the scene. The department has been criticized for not stationing a 24-hour watch to make

GERRY GROPP—SIPA



J. PATRICK FORDEN—SYGMA





MAGGIE HALLAHAN—NETWORK IMAGES

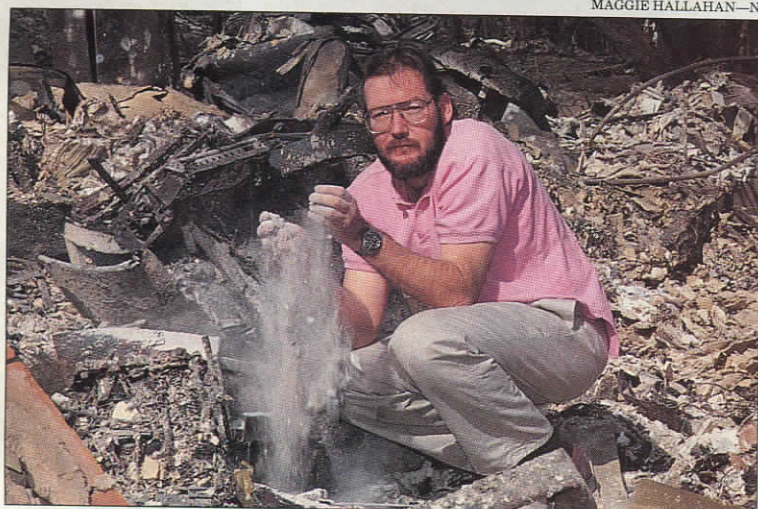
sure the fire didn't rekindle; there have also been complaints that the department delayed calling in aerial support until it was too late. But Oakland Fire Chief Lamont Ewell, on the job for just 14 days, insisted that a round-the-clock watch wouldn't have made any difference given the abruptness of the flare-up and the severity of the winds. Those conditions were exacerbated by hills that were tinderbox-dry after five years of drought, by Californians' penchant for living in scenic, hard-to-reach wooded areas and by budget cuts that left the fire department undermanned. All together, they seem to have made disaster inevitable. The fire was particularly demoralizing for an area that only two years ago suffered through a shattering October earthquake. State Sen. Nicholas Petris ruefully told the San Francisco Chronicle that Oakland should ban October from the calendar.

No time: With the fire blazing so quickly through the hills, virtually no one had time to rescue belongings. New Mercedeses, Saabs and BMWs, looking as if they had been firebombed, are now worth about \$50 in scrap. Distraught pet owners immediately set up

a hot line to help locate missing dogs and cats; one family in Montclair freed their hamster and rabbit before they fled themselves. Three people waited out the fire in the water of a swimming pool, the tarp pulled over their heads to keep out the asphyxiating fumes. Some who tarried to pick up treasures paid a high price. One elderly man's hair was set afire by flying embers. At least 10 people were burned alive in their cars.

It's horrible to lose everything one owns, but it's survivable. My new novel, 200 pages long, is gone. (Maxine Hong Kingston also lost her house, together with the computer disk containing the only copy of her latest book; Reggie Jackson, living through his second house fire, lost baseball memorabilia.) But my eight neighbors are already discussing plans to form a consortium to rebuild the neighborhood. In the end, a certain optimism sets in: you owned too much stuff in the first place, you tell yourself. Then it starts to rain, and you think: I'm certain I have an umbrella. Or did.

MICHAEL ROGERS in Oakland



JAMES D. WILSON—NEWSWEEK

A once affluent neighborhood above the bay, burned beyond recognition: Firefighters battling the flames sweeping through the Oakland hills, the scene a day after the disaster, writer Rogers rummaging through the rubble that was once his home

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The fire: What we've learned

As we approach the first anniversary of the devastating Oakland-Berkeley hills fire, a pause is in order to consider what has been done and what we've learned.

In general, the city of Oakland has changed some firefighting methods and legislated some safety measures, but much more needs to be done to give hills resident a sense of security and confidence.

In some ways, nothing could have been done on that fateful Sunday, Oct. 20, 1991, to prevent or contain the blaze that eventually killed 25 people, injured 150, destroyed or damaged some 3,000 dwellings and caused some \$1.5 billion in damages.

Certain natural factors such as high winds, low humidity and high temperatures conspired to re-ignite a fire that wasn't fully extinguished the day before.

Questions remain about the Oakland Fire Department's response to the Saturday fire, which fire officials felt was sufficiently taken care of. In retrospect, not enough was done to completely snuff it out.

It is clear from an Oakland Tribune-KGO Channel 7 survey of people who lost their homes in the fire that they remain angry at the city for its response to the Saturday fire and they aren't confident the city is any better prepared today for another potential fire disaster of similar proportions.

The survey found, among other things, that 27 percent of those who lost homes won't be rebuilding. Some said they had encountered too many bureaucratic barriers or felt the city wasn't preparing quickly enough to successfully battle a future conflagration.

The survey was sent to 2,693 people and 1,135 responded. Of those who responded, 82 percent think that if the Oakland Fire Department had handled the Saturday fire differently, the Sunday killer firestorm could have been prevented.

Subsequently, the Oakland Fire Department has learned that lesson. It has increased wildland training for firefighters, who have been trained mostly to fight city dwelling fires. It pledges to post firefighters

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at the site of grassland fires overnight if conditions warrant.

The department now also uses helicopters with special infrared equipment to search for hot fire spots and now sends out more fire engines to hillside fires on high-danger days.

The fire departments of Oakland and Berkeley have also established an improved mutual-aid agreement, and the Oakland Fire Department has a new radio communication system and two weather stations in the hills.

In other matters, however, the response has been wanting by both the city of Oakland and the East Bay Municipal Water District.

One positive step was the stiffened city and state requirements for better quality wood shake roofs. But other matters remain unresolved including widening of some streets in the fire-affected area, placing utility lines underground, the installation of sirens or other kind of warning system in strategic hill areas, and the establishment of a special tax assessment district to raise money to cover some of these extra measures.

EBMUD has acted in some ways and not in others to address problems that contributed to the erratic response a year ago. It has installed a permanent emergency diesel generator to power pumps that fill the first two reservoirs in the hillside system, but hasn't solved the problem of having an adequate water supply in the other nine reservoirs serving the hill area.

Overall, some steps have been taken to improve the chances of battling a future hills fire, but much more needs to be done.

History of Fires, EAST BAY Hills

Date	Name	Acres Burned	# Deaths	# Build Lost	Air Temp	% Humid	Wind Speed
1923	Berkeley, 9-17-23	130		584	91	25%	40mph
1931							
1933	Sequoia/Joaquin Miller, 11-13-33	1000+		5	81	16%	35mph
1937	Mountain Blvd, 9-25-91	700		4	92	20%	
1940							
1946	Claremont Canyon, 9-23-46	1000		0	87	25%	
1955	Montclair, 11-8-55	10		0	83	31%	45mph
1960	E Oakland Hills, 10-15-60	1200		2	86	7%	
1961	Briones & Tilden, 11-12-61	200+		0	63	38%	20mph
1961							
1968	Naval Hospital, 10-23-68	150		0	75	40%	
1970	Fish Ranch Road, 9-22-70	204		37	85	30%	
1980	Grizzley Peak, 12-14-80	200		5	55	72%	20mph
1991							
OCT. 19 TH 1991	Oakland/Berkeley Firestrom, 10-20-91 100 Ac gone in 5min	1600	25	3350	90	12%	35mph